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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA, EUR/AGS and EUR/ERA

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SUBJECT: IRAQ ELECTIONS: AUSTRIANS MAKE POSITIVE STATEMENT

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1. Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik issued a positive statement on January 31 on the Iraq elections (para. 3 below). Plassnik highlighted the "courage" and "will to democracy and peace" of the Iraqis, in defiance of terrorist attacks.

2. Following our meeting with MFA Middle East Director Ralph Scheide on January 28 (reftel), EconPol Couns and Pol Unit Chief met with Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Astrid Harz on January 31. Harz said Plassnik's statement would appear in both German and English on the MFA web site.

3. Begin Statement:

Foreign Minister Plassnik: "Elections in Iraq an important step in the political renewal process"

Stabilization of the security situation remains number one priority

Future Iraqi constitution should take adequate account of the needs of all ethnic and religious groups

"The elections in Iraq have demonstrated the Iraqi citizens' resolve for self-determination," said Minister for Foreign Affairs Ursula Plassnik in an initial reaction to Iraq's first multi-party elections following the decades-long dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. "The Iraqi people refused to let the terrorists' threats and attempts at intimidation prevent them from exercising their right to vote," stressed the Foreign Minister, "which is a sign of their courage and absolute will to democracy and peace".

Plassnik expressed her regret that on election day too there had been terror attacks in Iraq that had claimed over 40 human lives. There were still forces at large that were working against the Iraqi people and their self-determination, said the Foreign Minister. The fact that the overwhelming majority of Iraq's Sunni Muslims had stayed away from the polling stations was a cause for concern, as it showed that Iraqi society is still "dangerously divided."

The newly elected transitional assembly and the future Iraqi government would therefore not only have to strive to establish greater security and bring about the consolidation of the political process; the assembly - according to Plassnik - "will have to draft a constitution that takes adequate account of the needs of all ethnic and religious groups in Iraq and thus contributes to the internal solidarity of the country."

Plassnik emphasized that the European Union had supported the political renewal process in Iraq, including the preparations for yesterday's elections, from the very outset. "Europe should continue to advocate a unified, stable and prospering Iraq in a peaceful environment. However, the stabilization of the security situation must remain the number one priority. That is the prime prerequisite for the successful implementation of the EU's assistance measures.

Austria is supporting the consolidation process within the country by providing training for Iraqi police officers and diplomats. A special training course for this purpose will begin in the next few days.

End statement.

Brown